

Finding of No Significant Impact
Snowstorm Exploration Project
Environmental Assessment
DOI-BLM-NV-W010-2012-0063-EA

Context

Snowstorm Exploration LLC (SEL) is proposing to expand their existing notice-level activities in the Snowstorm Mountains and Kelly Creek areas located northwest of Midas and southeast of Chimney Reservoir on the Little Humboldt River. The project area is located approximately 40 miles north-northeast of Winnemucca in Humboldt County, Nevada in T. 41 N., R. 43 E., portions of sections 1, 9 - 12, 14 - 16, and 20 - 36; T. 40 N., R. 43 E., portions of sections 1 - 5, 8 - 13, 16, and 17; and T. 40 N., R. 44 E., portions of sections 4 - 8.

SEL is proposing to combine existing exploration activities on four mining notices into a plan. The project boundary would encompass about 19,801 acres located entirely in Humboldt County. Overland travel, constructed access roads, and drill sites are proposed for a phased plan on public and private lands. Phase 1 will consist of 67.8 acres of disturbance that includes the existing notice disturbance (16.5 acres of public land and 3.3 acres on private land) and 48.0 acres of new disturbance. The plan also includes two staging areas and may include monitoring wells and a meteorological station. Reclamation would include recontouring the surface disturbances and revegetation. A total of 200 acres of disturbance on public and private land may be completed in multiple phases over the next 10 years.

Finding of No Significant Impact

I have determined that the impacts associated with the Proposed Action are not significant based on the interdisciplinary analysis conducted in the Snowstorm Exploration Project Environmental Assessment (EA) DOI-BLM-NV-W010-2012-0063-EA dated April 2015, a review of the exploration plan of operations, and my consideration of the Council of Environmental Quality's criteria for significance (40 CFR 1508.27), both with regard to the context and the intensity of impacts. Therefore, preparation of an environmental impact statement (EIS) pursuant to Section 102(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act is not required.

I have determined that the proposed action is in conformance with the approved Winnemucca District Resource Management Plan and is consistent with the plans and policies of neighboring local, county, tribal, State and federal governments to the greatest extent practical.

Intensity

1) *Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse.*

The EA considered possible beneficial and adverse impacts of the proposed exploration project. Benefits to the local communities through the use of local retail services, restaurants and lodging are possible throughout the approximate ten years of the project. Any adverse impacts would be classified as temporary as well, since they would either end, or through reclamation be wholly or partially mitigated after exploration has ceased. Upon completion of the exploration activities, all equipment would be removed, and surface disturbances would be recontoured and revegetated. There are no long-term impacts to the area anticipated from the exploration activities.

2) The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety.

Exploration activities are not expected to cause adverse public health effects. The proposed action includes observing prudent vehicle speeds and minimizing dust created by vehicle traffic and construction activities. Safety requirements would be required by the Mine Safety and Health Administration and the Nevada Industrial Relations Division of Mine Safety. No long term adverse public health or safety effects are expected from use of the reclaimed area.

3) Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

The project would not affect park lands, prime farmland, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers or ecologically critical areas. All areas to be disturbed by exploration activity have been surveyed and evaluated for historic and/or cultural resources.

4) The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment are likely to be highly controversial.

Exploration drilling projects have a long history in Nevada. The exploration related techniques involved are all common methods employed in the mining industry and are not expected to produce uncertain or unique risks. Although not highly uncertain or involving unique or unknown risks, recommended mitigation was developed in the EA concerning cultural resources and special status species.

5) The degree to which the possible effects on the quality of the environment are likely to be highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The exploration techniques are all common methods employed in the mining industry and are not expected to produce uncertain or unique risks.

6) The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

Approval of the proposed action would not set any known precedents or establish any principles for future decisions. The proposed exploration activities have been commonly applied for several decades.

7) Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts.

Cumulative impacts to the area were assessed in the EA. Five separate Cumulative Effects Study Areas (CESAs) were developed for the cumulative impacts analyses. An Air Quality CESA addressed potential impacts to air quality; a Noxious Weeds CESA assessed potential impacts to noxious weeds, invasive and non-native species, soils and vegetation; the Range CESA comprised of the Bullhead Grazing Allotment assessed potential impacts to livestock grazing and range resources; the Wild Horse CESA assessed impacts to wild horses in the Snowstorm Mountains Herd Management Area and the Osgood Mountains Herd Area; and the Wildlife CESA assessed potential impacts to migratory birds, special status wildlife species, and general wildlife. Through these analyses it was determined that no significant cumulative impacts would result from the proposed action.

8) The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the NRHP or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources.

The proposed action would have no adverse effects to any of these resources, since SEL would avoid all eligible cultural resources or any contributing elements within the Project Area. Eligible sites or any contributing elements would be avoided by a buffer zone of 100 feet. In cases of historic roads the non-contributing elements would continue to be utilized and the contributing elements would not be utilized for transportation. The contributing elements would continue to be avoided by the 100 feet buffer zone during all other activities.

9) *The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under Endangered Species Act of 1973.*

Informal consultation was conducted with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and no threatened or endangered species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) were identified within the Project Area or vicinity. However, in March 2010, the USFWS concluded that Greater sage-grouse species were “warranted, but precluded” for listing as a threatened or endangered species (75 *Federal Register* 13910, March 23, 2010; USFWS 2010a). The USFWS is mandated by law to make a decision by September 2015.

The EPMs for Greater sage-grouse were negotiated by the interdisciplinary team, including cooperating agencies, NDOW and Humboldt County utilizing IM-NV-2012-058 which was in effect during this negotiation.

10) *Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.*

No threats of violation were identified in the preparation of the EA and any Decision regarding this proposed project would stipulate that the operator must obtain all necessary approvals from other federal, state, and local agencies before proceeding with the proposed action. The BLM would make at least two inspections each year to ensure compliance with the approved Plan of Operations. Additionally, the Nevada Division of Environmental Protection would make regular inspections pertaining to the reclamation permit.

/s/ James W. Schroeder
James W. Schroeder, Field Manager
Humboldt River Field Office

6/26/2015
Date